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Magnet school community to speak at council hearing

Operating budget for fiscal 2011 includes cuts to programs

by Mimi Liu | Staff Writer

Students, parents and community members from Parkland Middle School are scheduled to speak at tonight's County Council public hearing in an attempt to save the middle school magnet consortium programs from being cut from the fiscal 2011 budget.

The program would cut teaching positions that are essential to the continuation of the magnet program, PTSA members have said.

In the past, Parkland suffered from low performances on standardized tests. In the few years since the magnet program was integrated into the curriculum — the school's formal name is now Parkland Magnet Middle School for Aerospace Technology — students have been performing better academically, said Cecily Adams, co-president of Parkland's PTSA.

The program has given the Aspen Hill school a renewed sense of pride. Through the magnet program, Parkland students have spoken with astronauts in space and met with NASA officials. This past spring, Parkland was one of four schools invited to the White House to speak with astronauts aboard the International Space Station because of its magnet program.

In January, parents and students appealed to the Board of Education at two public hearings to save the consortium program.

Adams said the teacher cuts would eliminate an extra class period from the eight-period schedule, which students need to take an elective course or choose an accelerated course in math or science that would count toward high school credit.

"This completely restructures the academic program and takes away what makes Parkland unique in providing a very strong foundational science program," Adams said. "We're going to go and voice our opinions and be heard. This is our future and the nation's future. We can't look shortsighted."

Adams said Parkland prides itself on having a diverse student population involved with the sciences.

"We've always faced challenges of having diversity in the sciences," Adams said. "Parkland strives for racial and ethnic diversity. It has a very active Latino population in the sciences, and we had several young ladies who testified at the Board of Education (hearing), highlighting that girls in the middle school consortium can be the next scientist, astronaut or information technology specialist. It's empowerment for all of the students."

Under potential budget reductions for Montgomery County Public Schools, Parkland, along with A. Mario Loiederman in Wheaton and Argyle in Layhill, face the possibility of having eight teacher positions eliminated. The staff reduction would save the school system \$515,472 from its operating budget.

Loiederman offers a magnet program in creative and performing arts, and Argyle offers a magnet program in digital design and development.

In February, the county Board of Education came out with a budget proposal of \$2.26 billion. The proposal was sent to County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who released his budget recommendations March 15. The county executive's budget for MCPS was \$138 million lower than the amount the school board had proposed. The county is facing an overall budget deficit of \$779 million.

The budget now is in the hands of the County Council for approval.

Adams also said there is concern parents will pull their children out of Parkland if the magnet program is not available.

"We have parents who come from places like Clarksburg, Poolesville, Gaithersburg, Potomac and Rockville," Adams said. "If there is no magnet program, then parents will be thinking, 'What is the point of commuting?'"

According to the MCPS Web site, the Middle School Magnet Consortium was started by a \$7.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education between 2004 and 2007. The purpose of the grant was to improve student performance and lower socioeconomic isolation at consortium schools, as well as to provide students with more choices in middle school programs in Montgomery County.

"Ever since that grant has run out, every year this program has been on the chopping block, and every year the Board of Education has found a way to fund it," Adams said. "Superintendent (Jerry) Weast knows it's a very strong program. However, we end up as a community continuously fighting for the funding."

Parkland principal Benjamin OuYang has expressed pride in the school's magnet program. When OuYang was notified in July the school had made enough progress on the Maryland School Assessment tests to be taken off the state's list of schools that needed improvement, he told The Gazette, "I was so happy when I saw the results, but mostly I was happy for the staff and students because they were so focused."

He could not be reached for comment for this story.

Kelley Eiskant, Loiederman Middle School's PTSA president, said the "lack of funding may drastically inhibit the program's ability to maintain its creative and performing arts focus."

In an e-mail to The Gazette, Eiskant wrote that students in sixth grade or those who have selected Loiederman for middle school next year "may not have the full opportunity to realize the dream they were promised."

Dana Tofig, county school system spokesman, said the magnet consortium program has not been eliminated, only that "it could be impacted" by budget cuts.

"Nothing's really on or off the table until we know what the county budget will be," Tofig said

"We're hoping that we can preserve the magnet programs because they've been so successful," he said, "but that is going to depend on some variables."

Tofig said one of those variables includes whether Montgomery County can obtain a waiver for the maintenance-of-effort requirement, which requires local governments to fund school systems at the same level as the previous year.

In late March, Leggett submitted a \$137.7 million waiver request to the state school board. Tofig said if the waiver is not approved, the school system will be penalized and lose state funding.

"Then the gap would be even bigger," Tofig said.

Adams said there is "a very strong likelihood" the County Council will not fund the magnet consortium for fiscal 2011.

"We're hoping for the positive, but the reality is that several County Council members have said publicly that the funding does not look like it will go through," Adams said.

Adams said the funding will come for "none or all" of the three schools.

Tofig said the school board has proposed eliminating 50 central office positions and increasing class sizes across the board by one student per classroom.

He said the increased class sizes would reduce the number of classroom teachers that would otherwise be needed for additional classes. Tofig said that would result in the elimination or involuntary transfers of 250 teachers.

"Our hope is to avoid layoffs or a significant number of layoffs," Tofig said. "We understand the difficult position that the county is in, but the money clearly isn't here. We can't go any deeper."

The last of the public hearings on the fiscal 2011 operating budget will take place today and Thursday night.

The fiscal 2011 budget is scheduled for adoption May 20, and would go into effect July 1.